

New old uncle blues

By Norbert Hirschhorn
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My Uncle Tedi, Theodore Hirschhorn, was 98 when he died this year. He was only 4 when he, my grandparents, his three sisters and my father fled from the fierce World War I fighting in Eastern Poland. I imagine him sitting up front on a cart packed high with bedding and pots and food-filled sacks, helping the drover guide the horses. He was fearless, even then.

The family made it to Vienna where he grew up. He joined the Socialist movement, took to the streets to protest fascism, and ended up in jail more than once. He had Hollywood good looks, that curly-haired Mediterranean kind. Women found him "dangerous." He trained as a textile engineer, able to manually program complex knitting patterns on the newest German machinery. That ability which brought him and my aunt, in 1935, to Salonika, Greece, recruited by a knitting mill owner needing just such an expert. Then came World War II. The Nazis overran Greece, and began deporting Jews. (Less than 5 percent of Salonika's once vibrant Jewish community survived.)

One day, a German army officer came to call. My aunt prepared for such an event, sent the maid out the back door to warn my uncle not to come home. "I'll wait for him," said the German. Then in toddled my cousin, 2 years old, blond and blue-eyed, and speaking German! The officer took her on his knee, showed her a picture of his daughter, and chatted. He then asked my aunt where a person could get a good shave and haircut. As he left he said to her, "Don't do anything foolish." That hour of reprieve brought my aunt, with the ready packed suitcase, the chance to meet my uncle at an appointed place. They fled to the mountains (his boss gave him the ID card of his dead brother), where he found work as an engineer in a now-German-run coal mine. Because he spoke both Greek and German, the Nazis used him as an interpreter, which then allowed him to inform the Greek partisans of whatever German plans he overheard. He had physical courage as well: Once, when he thought he was being followed, he had his knife out ready to kill the potential assailant. Both my aunt and uncle said those years in the mountains were the happiest of their lives.

The family came to America in 1956 to join my parents - after the 1946-49 civil war the new right-wing government of Greece thought anyone who had been a partisan was a likely Communist - and soon his skills as an engineer brought him solid work, a nice house, good car, education for his children, the American dream. Michel Montaigne, the 16th century French Essayist, once wrote, "No man shall be called happy until after his death" - that is, judgment can come only after the whole life is done. For me, with Uncle Tedi, it came much sooner. He accepted me for myself, welcomed my non-Jewish wife and daughter, listened to my troubles during divorce, then welcomed my new wife, all without judgment, a role parents find hard. As importantly, his stories are my only link to my parents' lives. Oh, and chess — he was a formidable player. Only in the last years, a widower, his memory slipping, did I finally win a game.

Uncle Tedi was the last of our parents' entire generation. My cousin has "appointed" me, now the eldest, as the new family patriarch, with my own nephews, niece and grandchildren in whose lives perhaps I can play a similar role. I once wrote a poem called "New Old Uncle Blues," which goes, in part,

We're the new old uncles, them other ones is gone.
Said we're the new old uncles, them old old ones is gone....
We was once such lil' kids, hackin' about the yard.
Said we was once them no-good kids, smackin' about the yard.
Now that we're the new old folk, life's so gol-dang hard.
Life's so gol-dang hard, I say, we hadn't got a prayer.
Yeah, life's so gol-dang hard, we hadn't got a prayer.
Well, we can't go back from where we come, no one to meet us there.

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